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ABSTRACT

Several schools of thought regarding media criticism, derived from diverse disciplines and literary sources, have emerged during the last decade. To examine their application to the visual communication media arts such as film and television, this paper: (1) reviews the literature of media criticism; (2) discusses various approaches to visual communication media criticism; and (3) provides examples of the application of existing visual communication approaches to criticism. Discussion includes parameters of visual communication media arts, critical approach versus critical method, and selection of criteria for the evaluation of visual communication media arts. The following critical approaches and their applications are examined: journalistic; historical; sociological; rhetorical; narrative; cultural; semiological; psychological; ideological; genre; producer's; and visual literacy. It is suggested that the development of visual media criticism is directly related to and depends upon the development of verified theories of the various visual communication media arts. (Contains 74 references.) (MAS)

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Approaches to Visual Communication Media Criticism and Their Application to Television Genres

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Abstract

Several schools of thought regarding media criticism have emerged during the last decade derived from diverse disciplines and literary sources. To examine their application to the visual communication media arts such as film and television genres, this paper (a) reviews the literature of media criticism, (b) discusses various approaches to visual communication media criticism, and (c) provides examples of the application of existing visual communication media approaches to criticism. This paper suggests that the development of visual communication media criticism is directly related to and depends upon the development of verified theories of the various visual communication media arts.

Introduction

Whereas literary sources referring to criticism of the arts and literature are plentiful and easily found, research findings that refer to critical methods of visual arts in general, and visual communication media arts in particular, are disproportionately limited. Literary criticism methods that analyze, evaluate, and interpret such forms as poetry, essays, novels, chronicles, etc., and fine arts criticism that evaluates such conventional art forms as painting, architecture, theater, film, music, sculpture, etc., are already established as unique academic discourses; they are readily available and widely publicized because these fields are founded on repeatedly verified theories. On the other hand, the noticeable shortage of genuine visual communication media arts critical methodologies is due to the lack of scientific theories that support their foundation across the board. Whereas it is true that such visual communication media arts as photography, theater, and film, for example, are based on verified theories, as academic disciplines such new visual communication media arts as television, holography, computer graphics, etc., lack empirical research findings in support of the constructs of their basic theories. Consequently, the development of an academic discourse such as the study of the visual communication media arts is directly related to, and influenced by, the development of critical methodologies that analyze them. Could the opposite be true?

This paper argues that the development of genuine critical methodologies for the evaluation of the various genres of visual communication media arts will contribute, decisively, towards the development of scientifically sound theories governing the field of study known as visual communication media arts. It suggests that by reviewing the existing methods of art criticism in general, and examining the critical methodologies scattered in such areas as communication, mass media, mass culture, popular arts, etc., we could end up with those standards of criticism that are most applicable and most appropriate

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for the evaluation of the various products of visual communication media. Such evaluation standards could become the constructs from which the major theories of the field could be developed since the main objective of critical inquiry is to create the standards for the evaluation of an art form. These standards become the independent variables in the verification of theories stemming from experimental research methodologies in those cases in which such empirical research is lacking. This is precisely the purpose of the empirical research methodology known as descriptive, or critical.

In support of the argument that the development of genuine critical methodologies will, retrospectively, contribute towards the development of the field of study known as visual communication media arts, we must first examine briefly what constitutes this field, we must then define and discuss the use of the term's *approaches* (as opposed to *genuine critical methods*) and, finally, we need to review the areas from which the standards for the evaluation of visual communication media art forms must be drawn. After that brief introduction we can examine the various approaches to visual communication media arts criticism and their application to various television genres.

The Parameters of Visual Communication Media Arts

What constitutes the field of visual communication media arts? Collectively, the media of painting, photography, film, television, holography, computer imagery, and multimedia constitute the field of visual communication media arts. Cartoons, drawings, photographs, frescoes, icons, film and television programs, holograms, video games, some forms of advertising and some material on the internet are visual communication media products, objects, or events that are seen or seen and heard. They are visual images or pictures with either apparent or implied motion and sounds. Their main purpose is to communicate messages either symbolically (i.e., the dove conveying peace), or as representations of objects or events (i.e., a photograph of a person), or as abstract forms of an object or event (i.e., a cartoon or a drawing of a tree). They are the products of media that employ their own instruments, materials, and techniques in the construction of the arts, events, or objects.

As a field of study, the visual communication media arts embrace such related disciplines as visual and auditory perception, communication, sociology, media technologies, art criticism, psychology, visual anthropology, and a host of others. It is mostly concerned with pictures and the ways that they are structured and delivered to communicate concepts, emotions, thoughts, and so forth. The total communicative effect of the visual media arts often depends on the skill, knowledge, inspiration, and sensibility of the media artist. In short, it relies on the artistic merits of the media product and this is of paramount importance to the visual communication media field of study.

Critical Approach Versus Critical Method

Why use the term approach, as opposed to critical methods? The term approach is preferred for the following reasons: (a) An approach is traditional in that it originates from a known, and often well established, school of thought, whereas a method is a technique by which the critical process is achieved after the medium and its products have been accepted. (b) An approach to visual communication media arts criticism places the emphasis of the critical inquiry on a crucial aspect (mostly on the message or content), whereas a method of criticism of the visual communication media arts considers the medium as well as the audience. (c) Whereas an approach is basically built on reasoning and inferences to develop its argumentation (linear process), the true critical method is an in-depth or vertical process resulting from the diverse arguments on production,

audience, and ideological factors, all of which are necessary for the effective analysis and evaluation of visual communication media products. In short, it is the approach to visual communication media art criticism that generates the method and not the other way around. As soon as visual communication media art forms (i.e., documentaries or westerns) create their genuine critical methodologies, they are bound to be considered unique art forms encompassing their own artistic elements and appreciated for their own aesthetic merits.

Selection of Criteria for the Evaluation of Visual Communication Media Arts

Where are the standards for the evaluation of visual communication media arts to be found? A meaningful discussion of what constitutes the standards for the evaluation of a particular film or television program must start first with the explanation and understanding of the generic terms *media*, *media products*, *communication media programs*, *visual media arts*, to mention only the most commonly used terms in media criticism. The responsible critic and/or evaluator of such commonly produced visual communication media art forms as film and television programs should obtain complete background information of these terms in all their ramifications. The literature is plentiful and the various sources are easily accessible. Therefore, only the basic concepts of these terms will be reviewed here as they relate to the creation of the standards for visual communication media criticism.

It is known that the term *media* refers to channels that convey messages for mass audience, as well as to the primary electronic channels that mediate communication in other contexts (Scodari & Thorpe, 1992). Television, as one of the most prominent visual communication media, is a mass audience oriented medium, mediating messages to vast, diversified, and heterogeneous audiences. This factor is crucial for the development of television criticism as a visual communication medium.

Media Products such as films and television shows are the artifacts produced by the media of film and television. The threefold process of *production*, *transmission*, and *presentation* of the visual communication media programs involves a network of institutions and people that the critics must consider. For example, the production process of television programs involves the establishment of powerful corporate television networks and media institutions with people working in the business, technology, or creative areas of the medium. Knowledge and understanding of the production units and the laws that govern them as institutions are necessary standards in media criticism. The transmission process of television programs arranges the means by which they reach the audience such as regular broadcasting, cable, close circuit, and pay television, and direct satellite broadcasting. This, in turn, decides the nature of the particular program in relationship to its intended audience. This is another important standard that the media critic must consider. The presentation process of the televised program is yet another key factor in media criticism. It decides the scheduling of the particular program that, in turn, determines the type of program presented.

The generic term *communication media*, in the context of the present discussion, refers to the ultimate function of all media, and particularly the visual communication medium of television to mediate or communicate messages to a vast audience. The communicative purpose of the medium, therefore, is unquestionable. The fact that all visual communication media, and particularly television, are exposed to a great number of obstacles that hinder the communication process needs to be emphasized. From the vast literature in the field we have learned that the communication flow can break down in any stage of the process. For example, it could be that the cause of the

breakdown occurred in the *sender*, the message area, in cases in which the issues mediated are not clear, cohesive, or interesting. It could be that the images, the pictures, technologically and artistically, are not faithful, clear, or truthful representations of the intended message in which case it is the *medium* that causes the breakdown of the communication act. Perhaps the *audience*, at the receiving end of the continuum was not ready or capable of translating and comprehending the mediated message and remained, therefore, unmotivated by the program. This motivation, translated in communication media terms as feedback, is another crucial factor involved in the communication process that may cause its breakdown. In the case of television watching, the feedback is indirect and communicated by the switching of the channels, anger, disappointment, or discomfort of the viewers. The various stages and areas in which the communication breakdown could occur are indicated in the visual communication media model. We call the breakdown noise interference that can occur in any of the features shown in the model below. It usually occurs in the transmission and reception stages and for this reason *noise* has been placed between the generated visual message, the channel, the receiver, and the feedback areas (see Figure 1).

The popular visual communication media of film and television consist, for the most part, of images that move and are enhanced with audio, three elements that are unique to these two media and constitute the bases for the critical evaluation of the programs they produce. Visual images tell the story. Depending on the way that they are presented on the screens (e.g., as long shots, medium shots, close-ups and zoom-ins), and the sequence they follow (e.g., cuts, dissolves, fades), pictures constitute the narrative aspect of the show. Obviously, the visual communication media program critics, particularly of film and television, should be aware of both the technology and the artistry involved in the creation of the images of the program. The narrated text (script), along with various other natural or added sounds, support the visual images to tell the story; they assist in the development of the characters, help to establish the atmosphere of the program, and enhance the mood underlining the program. Naturally, the visual communication media critics must have knowledge of script writing, story

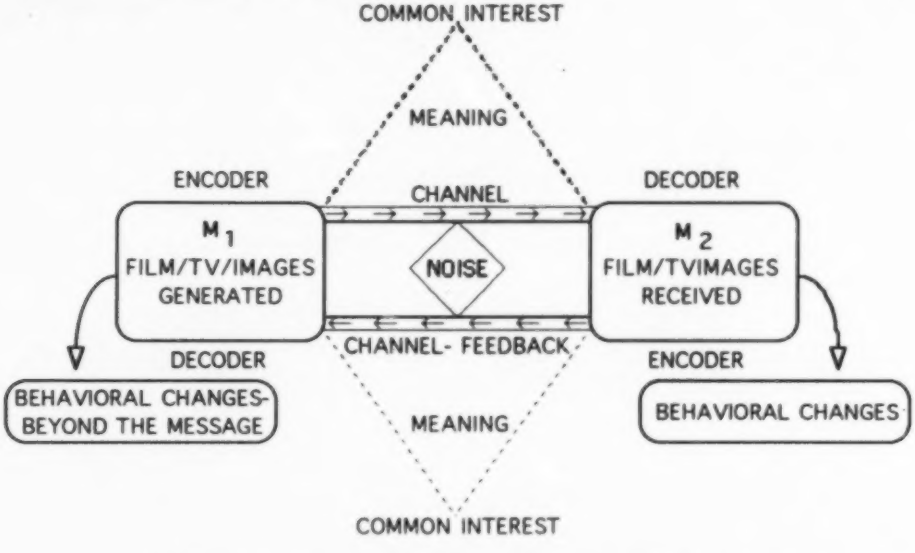

Figure 1. Visual Communication Media Model

and character development, the functions performed by various sounds as well as their technology and artistry in the production of the program. Finally, the motion of the images that creates the sense of liveliness and reality on the screen and provides depth to the pictures is yet another factor that visual communication critics must acknowledge. Critics must explain how motion helps to create, technologically and artistically, the program and they must be able to comment on the importance of motion in the perception, recognition, and artistic success of the film or television program. In summary, this brief review of (a) the parameters of the field of visual communication media arts, (b) the distinction between critical methodology and approach to criticism, and (c) the areas from which the standards for criticism must be drawn, provides the necessary background for the discussion of the approaches to visual communication media arts criticism that follows.

Criticism Approaches and Their Application

As stated earlier, the most representative media of the field of study known as visual communication media arts are film and television, and between these two media the most popular, the most widely used, and the most powerful is television. Therefore, it demands greater attention, a closer look at the products it produces, and better consideration as an art form. Since television theorists and researchers have not yet managed to organize its numerous constructs so that the concise theories that support the medium can be formalized, the development of appropriate critical methodologies might be the way to close the gap.

From the traditional studies of the arts, communication, mass media, popular arts, public or pop arts, various approaches to television criticism have emerged. Although not fully developed, one can find in today's literature a variety of sources discussing television critical techniques, inquiries, reviews, reports, commentaries, few of which are generic television critical methods, as described earlier.

The serious efforts during the last fifty years of a considerable number of television scholars, media critics, observers, communicators, media analysts such as Adler and Cater (1975); Cater and Adler (1975), Cawelti (1971, 1976), Crombeck (1984), Fiskie (1987), Fiskie and Hartley (1978), Hadas (1962), McLuhan (1964), Newcomb (1974, 1987), Rybacki and Rybacki (1991), Scodari and Thorpe (1992), Seldes (1956, 1961), Shayon (1962, 1971), Smith (1980), Vande Berg and Wenner (1991), and many others, have resulted in the formation of a plethora of critical approaches to television programs that are reviewed below. The variety of approaches and their numerous applications to existing television programs suggest that unless the emphasis shifts from its present linear or content oriented practice to a more appropriate for the medium's idiosyncrasies vertical one, television criticism as an academic discourse will not be achieved. The consideration of the television program as a visual communication medium art form that is analyzed, evaluated, and interpreted on the basis of its artistic or aesthetic merit is what genuine television criticism ought to be (Zettl, 1978). Therefore, we can presently talk about existing approaches to television criticism but we are not yet ready to talk about fully developed television criticism as we do in film and theater criticism. Well established as critical methods in literature, the arts, and more specifically in such visual communication media arts as theater and film, the reviewed critical approaches listed below and their application to the various television genres derive their origins from literary and art criticism and they are: (1) the Journalistic Approach, (2) the Sociological Approach, (3) the Historical Approach, (4) the Rhetorical Approach, (5) the Semiological Approach, (6) the Cultural Study Approach, (7) the Genre Approach, (8) the Producer's

Approach, (9) the Narrative Approach, (10) the Ideological Approach, (11) the Psychological Approach, and (12) the Visual Literacy Approach to visual communication media arts criticism.

The Journalistic Approach

This is the oldest approach to visual communication media arts criticism but it has found its wider application to television criticism as reviews, commentaries, reports, opinions, and short essays on various kinds of television programs. The major characteristics of the journalistic approach to visual communication media arts in general, and to television in particular, are as follows: (a) They are not traditional literary critiques but mostly subjective opinions, individual views, and personal comments of media writers; (b) They are tailored for and addressed to the mass readers of magazines and newspapers written mostly to entertain rather than to inform; (c) They are mostly concerned with the sociological issues of the program and seldom refer to the medium and its artistic potentials.

Examples of various kinds of journalistic approaches to television criticism can be found in such popular North American newspapers and magazines as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Saturday Review*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The New Yorker*, *TV Guide*, *Variety*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* magazines, to mention only those where known journalists write television critiques.

Although the overall contributions of journalists to the development of television as a unique medium turned out to be positive, antagonism and competition (mostly during the early years) of print media and electronic media hindered the development of television as an art form (Himmelstein, 1981). The journalistic approach to television criticism leaves out key elements of critical inquiry that are crucial for the development of television criticism as a responsible academic discourse.

A striking example of how journalistic writing does not meet the standards of critical inquiry is Morris Wolfe's (1985) book *Jolts: The TV Wasteland and the Canadian Oasis*. Wolfe (1985), a Canadian journalistic television critic, has attempted to analyze the content of American and Canadian television genres, across the board, resulting in a series of unsupported opinions strictly based on the social context of popular television programs of the two countries (Metallinos, 1991).

In their discussion of journalistic form of writing on television criticism, Vande Berg and Wenner (1991) suggest that: ". . . journalistic news, gossip, opinions, columns, and reviews of programs are not television criticism" (p. 18). Furthermore, they indicate that the features of journalistic writing such as audience, style, vocabulary, length, proofs, all fall short in their attempt to fully describe, evaluate, and interpret the television programs (Vande Berg & Wenner, 1991). The critical questions most typical to the journalistic approach to television criticism can be drawn from various areas of journalistic criticism which, according to Vande Berg and Wenner (1991) are: (a) personality or star gossip, mostly found in *TV Guide* and tabloids, (b) industry news updates commonly found in *Channels of Communication*, *Broadcasting Magazine*, *Videography*, *Video Systems*, (c) previews, mostly found in such popular magazines and newspapers as *TV Guide*, *The Soap Opera Digest*, *Variety*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and (d) opinion essays, commonly found in *The New York Times*, *Channels of Communication*, *The New Yorker*.

Although the journalistic approach to visual communication media arts criticism is here to stay, its application does not substantially contribute toward the development of the media as art forms and particularly to "academic television criticism" (Vande Berg & Wenner, 1991, p. 23; Bywater & Sobchack, 1989).

The Historical Approach

The Historical Approach to visual communication media arts criticism is among the older approaches and centers on the historical events that caused the development of the particular visual communication media art forms. The bases of criticism of the arts are drawn from history, the discipline that studies systematically past events that effect nations, arts, and sciences. The various historical circumstances that help the art forms to be developed, along with the cultural institutions of the society, are the areas from which the standards for the evaluation of the historical approach to visual communication media arts are drawn.

From the existing literary sources that acknowledge the historical approach to visual communication media arts criticism, discuss its objectives, and underline its function, there are three that need to be cited here because each one gives a unique perspective to the historical approach to media criticism.

Bywater and Sobchack (1989) believe that the functions performed by the historical approach to film criticism, which can be extended to all visual communication media art forms, are to describe them in their historical context, to analyze them in terms of their aesthetic, economic, and social efforts, and to evaluate them in terms of their historical impact. These functions are most applicable to film, for which these authors suggest that:

> . . . the historical approach to film criticism is always marked by he context of history – both the general history of the world from the time the first films were made until now, and also the specific history of the movies as a business, as technological achievement, as artistic artifact. Those using a historical approach when assessing films attempt to understand how films have happened in time. (p. 139)

Scodari and Thorpe (1992) recognize the importance of the historical approach to visual communication media arts criticism, and suggest that this approach is closely related to social criticism because all historical events occur within a social context. They theorize that:

> The social/historical track is one that examines critical objects from the perspective of how they might contribute to the comprehension of ourselves and our society. In this instance, the critic might examine the changes or benchmarks that have occurred over a period of time – the historical events that can be documented as part of this network's culture, particularly as they might reflect the larger culture. (p. 18)

Vande Berg and Wenner (1991) acknowledge the importance of the historical approach to television criticism, discuss its various functions, and underline its domains. They maintain that:

> Historical criticism describes and analyzes television texts within their historical contexts. Historical analyses attempt to assess the roles that technological, economic, political, legal, regulatory, and aesthetic factors have played in the creation, reception, and impact of television texts in a particular society. Historical analyses, then, examine the intersection of producers, texts, and society. (p. 31)

From the comments provided by these three sources the following suggestions emerge: (a) There is an eminent and unavoidable connection between historical and sociological approaches to visual communication media arts criticism which makes the task of the art critic more demanding. (b) The relationship of the historical approach with that of the sociological is considered a limitation, rather than an advantage as some television scholars have also suggested (Cheserbo, 1987; Marc, 1984;

Williams, 1992, etc.). (c) This approach to visual communication media criticism is not only one of the older ones, it is also one of the most fundamental for the development of visual communication media arts criticism, and for their entire field of study.

The historical critics ask such historically oriented questions as: How have the generic, artistic, aesthetic, or even economic developments of a film or a television program changed over time? From the various television genres in existence, such programs as the *Civil War*, the *World at War*, are better suited to a critical inquiry of the historical approach. However, any popular television program (including children's television programs or cartoons) can be evaluated in terms of evolutionary changes (Williams, 1991).

The Sociological Approach

This approach to visual communication media arts criticism is among the older, most traditional, and widely used approaches. It derives its origin from the social sciences and arts criticism, which examine them through the framework of social relations and social functions. It centers on the various social issues, rules, relationships, and procedures contained in the film and television scripts and interprets the social effects of the programs on the viewer. In its broader adaptation and usage, the sociological approach to television criticism considers television programs, particularly the popular ones in prime time (such as situation comedies and detective stories), to be the catalysts of the socialization process and the ones that influence the social, occupational, economic, and a host of other types of behavioral occurrences of the individual viewers (Berger, 1982; McLuhan & Powers, 1989; McQuail, 1969; Sklar, 1980).

The sociological critics of the popular visual communication media arts of film and television draw their standards of criticism from the changes that take place in society and explain how institutions are effected by the programs. The sociological critics' concerns also lie in classes, status, and races. They examine the creation of stereotypes and lifestyles as the result of people's exposure to these media programs. It is the concern of the sociological critic of visual communication media arts to point out to what extent the arts express society's basic ideologies and the degree to which these art forms gratify the needs and wants of the citizens.

The sociological approach to visual communication media arts of film and television is a respected approach to criticism. It helps to predict the covert effects the program's content has on the viewers. It stimulates the creation of serious and effective public debates. This approach to criticism, however, is limited for the following reasons: (a) It centers its efforts primarily on issues that concern society and its institutions, stripping the content to its bare minimum by placing the emphasis on content factors rather than media related constructs. Undoubtedly, this helps the development of theories of mass communication media (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975), but does not contribute directly toward the development of generic visual communication media arts criticism. (b) The role of the medium as an art form which shapes the mediated message is often left out of the sociological approach that is heavily content oriented. Critical studies in mass communication media suggest that this overemphasis on content and descriptive analyses of sociological issues in film and television programming has helped to maintain the tradition of *message* rather than a *medium* oriented critical analysis (Avery & Eason, 1991). (c) It down-plays the role of the visual communication media products as art forms with artistic merits and aesthetic potentials. Sociological critics are not interested in the development of the media products as art forms capable of expressing emotions and feelings. Rather, they see them as social signifiers and cultural commentary.

The critics of the sociological approach to visual communication media arts ask such questions as: What are the underlying sociological (and other) reasons that make a film or a television program so popular? What were the social influences of the program on its viewers? Such popular films as *Top Gun* and prime time television sitcoms as *The Bill Cosby Show* can be effectively analyzed and evaluated with the sociological approach to visual communication media arts criticism, among others.

The Rhetorical Approach

This approach to art criticism derives from the ancient Greek philosophers Protagoras and Aristotle who developed rhetoric as an art form in public speaking. Through the centuries it has been modified and reformed and has been used by many critics of the media arts including speech, storytelling, film, and television (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). It is the most conventional of art criticism and the most descriptive because it draws its standards from such traditional rhetorical schemata, or techniques of persuasion, as *ethos* (or ethical consideration), *pathos* (or truthfulness of the argumentation), and *logos* (or narrative standards), regardless of the art and the medium that carries it. The rhetorical approach considers all the protagonists involved in the acts of creating, transforming, and responding to the art such as the *sender*, the *medium*, and the *audience*.

The wide application of the rhetorical approach to visual communication media arts criticism, and primarily to television programs, is rather recent and it comes from the works of speech communication and media scholars starting with Kenneth Burke (1950) and Karlyn Campbell (1972) and continued with the works of Foss (1989), Medhurst and Benson (1984), Smith (1980), Farrell (1989), etc. Critical studies that examine how media messages are structured to influence audiences belong to the rhetorical critical approach. The persuasive role of the mediated event is another major concern of this approach to criticism, and it is for this reason that the critics look for those particular aspects of the program that exert the greatest persuasive power on their audiences.

As all network television commercials indicate, their ultimate success is due to their excessive use and persuasive techniques. Application, therefore, of this approach to television criticism is very useful as it identifies the hidden intentions (the persuasive objectives) of the program. A rhetorical analysis of a television documentary, for example, might reveal the persuasive, subjective, and biased intentions of the producers that, otherwise, will pass unnoticed.

The rhetorical approach to visual communication media arts criticism is both useful and effective for the following reasons: (a) It draws its criteria for the analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of media programs from the structural analysis of their texts, and from the ways by which the visual media mediate and present the events, the messages. (b) It is applicable to all visual communication media art forms, and primarily embraces all television program formats from commercials to documentaries. (c) More than any other critical approach, the rhetorical comes close to an academic critical discourse, recognized and accepted by all scholars seriously concerned with the development of visual communication media arts criticism in general, and television in particular (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991).

The critics of the rhetorical approach ask such questions as: What persuasive means were used in the science series *Cosmos*? In what ways have the texts' structures of the films *The Third Man* or *Citizen Kane* influenced their spectators? Evidently, this approach to criticism can be applied to a variety of visual communication media products such as music shows (Morse, 1991), political debates (Mumby & Spitzak, 1991), and game shows (Williams & Rigby, 1991).

The Narrative Approach

The origins of the narrative approach to art criticism are found in Aristotle's *Poetics* in which the three known forms of poetry—epic, dramatic, and lyric—are reviewed and the main differences between epic and dramatic narrations (or plots) are examined (Fergusson, 1961). It has maintained its presence in literature and art criticism, mostly under the auspices of rhetorical criticism and has arrived in its present form, revitalized, defined, and acknowledged as a unique approach to visual communication media art products by such proponents as Fisher (1987), Chatman (1978), Deming (1985), Lewis (1987), Smith (1988), and Martin (1986), all of whom acknowledge its rightful application in visual communication media arts forms, particularly in film and television.

The central concern of the narrative approach to visual communication media arts criticism is the analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of the story of the programs as it is narrated by the text, visuals, and sounds. Since the various narrative elements that constitute the program's storytelling can be drawn from myths, social situations, political figures, dramatic heroes, and a plethora of other circumstances, this approach to criticism is collectively called narrative to incorporate such other critical approaches found in the literature of criticism as mythical method (Vande Berg & Wenner, 1991, p. 32), dramatistic criticism, and aesthetic criticism (Scodari & Thorpe, 1992).

The goals of the narrative approach to criticism are to reaffirm the existing ideas and images and to revitalize, reinforce, and purify them (Fisher, 1987). Being a byproduct of the rhetorical approach, the narrative approach to visual communication media arts criticism uses the rhetorical structure of discourse and storytelling to evaluate the media product. It looks at the ways the story is told and examines the characters involved in the action, the setting in which the action occurred, the signs used, the archetypal models of the society and a host of other similar elements from which the standards for analysis are drawn.

According to Vande Berg and Wenner (1991), the critics of the narrative approach, to extract the appropriate standards for their evaluations, ask these questions:

> What world view – cultural or archetypal models of social identity, values, actions, and structuring – is affirmed, in the narrative? What abstract ideas, values, roles, and beliefs are presented as good or evil, heroic or villainous, or natural or unnatural in this narrative? What other opposing characters, settings, and actions are present? In what other environment or past forms has this story been presented? (p. 32)

Like its predecessor, rhetoric, the narrative approach to visual communication media products applies to almost all genres of film and television programs. However, its overemphasis on the textual analysis of the program, its general look at the television program's plot, character, and symbolism, and the perpetual absence of any meaningful discussion of the production elements of the programs, are some of the major drawbacks of this approach to criticism as it is used today by television analysts.

The Cultural Approach

Developed as a means to explain the impact of visual communication media products in creating popular culture, the cultural approach to criticism examines the creation and distribution of meaning in contemporary society. The critics of this approach draw the standards for the evaluations on the observed trends and movements such as the civil rights, anti-nuclear, and environmental issues found in such mass communication media as film, television, music books, magazines, and newspapers. And, among its founders and proponents are Allen (1987), Carey (1988), Davies, Farrell, and Mathews

(1982), Fiskie (1987), Hall (1982), Rybacki & Rybacki (1991), and Steward, Smith, and Denton (1984).

There is a general agreement among the proponents of the cultural approach to media arts criticism that it is widely spread, covers several other disciplines and areas of study, and that this approach is most applicable to film and television programs of all genres. For example, Scodari and Thorpe (1992) generally agree on the wide application of the cultural studies approach to media criticism and on its wide spread to other disciplines and explain that:

> Cultural studies is a broad framework for interpreted research with roots in fields such as anthropology and literature [Carey; Fiskie; Hall]. It considers all types of discourse, artifacts, myths, and rituals as texts, through which a shared culture is created, modified, and transformed [Carey, 41-43]. (p. 48)

So do Vande Berg and Wenner (1991) who point out the numerous other areas covered under the broader umbrella of cultural approach to media criticism and state that:

> This approach assumes that ideology, economic structures, and culture are inseparable. This critical perspective is rooted in a combination of neo-Marxist political-economic theory, structuralism and semiotics, and Freudian psychoanalytical theory. This approach examines class, race, and gender issues in television programs by invoking ideology, hegemony, and discourse as central critical constructs. (p. 27)

The wide range and application of this critical approach to visual communication media arts of all genres is also confirmed by Rybacki and Rybacki (1991) who argue that:

> Cultural approaches to criticism are most organic methods of communication criticism because they do not depend on a single theory base. Because there are so many possibilities for doing cultural criticism, no single approach can be identified as the cultural approach. (p. 132)

It is, therefore, evident that this approach to criticism is one of the most appropriate and most applicable to the visual communication media arts. It gathers evaluative judgments from a variety of academic disciplines, theories, and cultural movements that strengthen the analysis. It covers a vast number of issues (e.g., political, economic, social, ideological, and cultural) found in all film and television genres today. Finally, this approach to criticism considers equally the significance of the message and the importance of the medium in shaping the message, a concept based on McLuhan's (1964) thesis that the medium is the message, and establishes that the cultural studies approach is most appropriate and most applicable to visual communication media arts criticism.

The cultural studies critic challenges the socio-cultural, political, and other such movements, and asks such questions as: What are the various ideological forces that produced these movements? How does the movement (such as the civil rights, feminism, or neo-nazism) influence the viewers? How do the media techniques employed assist in delivering the message? Examples of the application of this approach to film and television criticism are found in narrative films such as *Saturday Night Fever* (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989) and in television such as *The Late Night Talk Shows* (Buxton, 1991), and *TV Quiz Shows* (Fiskie, 1991).

The Semiological Approach

The basic premise of the semiological approach to visual communication media arts criticism is that

the more we understand the signs system of our culture the more readily we perceive their meaning in society. It originates in semiotics, the scientific study of signs and examines how the laws and conditions under which signs and symbols (including words) assume their meaning. It is purely a scientific approach to visual communication media arts criticism because its main concern is the development of knowledge about language to increase its influences in scientific as well as artistic works. Since all art forms are symbolic, the semiological approach to visual communication media arts criticism is fundamental for the development of criticism of the particular visual communication media arts.

Developed first in film studies as a language of cinema (Metz, 1974), the semiological approach to visual communication media arts criticism looks at the ways by which the programs' texts (the scripts) are created (Silverman, 1983). It examines the program's structure and discusses its effectiveness, or shortcomings, to communicate the intended meanings. The standards, therefore, for this approach to criticism are the codes, metaphors, signs, and the syntagmatic structures of the programs, all of which derive their origins from the academic discourses known as structuralism and semiotics. The symbolic representation of meaning inherent in the film or television pictures is analyzed by the semiological approach which Vande Berg and Wenner (1991) classify as metacritical approaches due to its dual origin from structuralism and semiotics.

Although its application in film studies and criticism is both extensive and effective, when it is tried by television critics the semiological approach turns out to be limited and ineffective for the following reasons: (a) The development of the fictional film scripts exceeds, by far, the development of fictional television scripts. Therefore, the creation of the language or text of the commonly found television programs can not be readily achieved by a semiotic analysis which requires well written, carefully thought-out, and linguistically structured scripts. (b) The lack of conventional iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs--in the vast land of television programming--does not, as yet, permit the use of semiotics to evaluate them, as it is easily possible with the conventional and well established signs and codes of the medium of film. (c) The across the board low quality of television programs, particularly network television programs, destined to entertain the masses, do not warrant, at this time, evaluation standards as complex, scientific, and sophisticated as those proposed by the semiological approach. An indication, perhaps, that television has matured as an art form, will be when such an approach is widely adopted and commonly used by television critics.

The visual communication media arts critics who use the semiological approach developed their argumentation on such questions as What is the ideology behind the use of black and white, instead of color, in this film, or television program? What is the basic cinematic, or television language of the particular film or television program, and how does it work? Among the various film and television genres most suitable to a semiological criticism could be Fellini's film *Amarcord* or the television program *Thirtysomething* (Porter, 1991).

The Psychological Approach

The psychological impact of the arts on individuals and their institutions was first pointed out by Plato in *The Republic* and Aristotle in *The Poetics*; later on it was established by the father of psychology and the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and it continued with Freud's pupils and followers, Carl Jung (1875-1961), Alfred Adler (1870-1937), Otto Rank (1884-1939), and Abraham Maslow (1954), to mention only those directly related to the present discussion. The powerful impact of the arts on individuals and society alarmed, early on, the philosophers and the thinkers of the western world who generated the ethical and the aesthetic

approaches to art criticism.

Stemming from the behavioral sciences, the psychological approach to visual communication media arts criticism assumes different forms such as *psychoanalysis* (concerned with the emotional state of the individual), *social psychology* (concerning the relationship of the individual with society), the *Maslowean or motivational psychology* (that centers on the basic human needs, wants, and desires the arts fulfill in various degrees), and the *Jungian psychoanalysis*, (which equates films as dreams), *perceptual psychology* (which refers to receiving and organizing sensory data), *cognitive psychology* (which refers to the de codification of perceived data). The basic factors that concern all forms of psychological approach to visual communication media arts criticism are emotions, feelings, learning abilities, perception, motivation, cognition, needs and desires, memory, thinking, intuition, and sensation. These, and a great number of other similar factors constitute both the constructs upon which the various psychological theories are built, and the standards for the evaluation of the visual communication media arts criticism.

In the case of film and television criticism, the critics of the psychological approach focus their attention on the program's effects on their viewers caused by such additional psychological factors as persuasion, change of attitude, morality, and artistic appeal. Since any of these factors can be found in almost all film and television genres, the psychological critics rely on the behavior, the attitudes, and the actions of the characters to develop the arguments for their analyses. Consequently, those programs that have strong characters, well structured plots, with emphasis on the emotional involvement of the viewers, are more suitable to psychological approach to visual communication media arts criticism. For example, films like *Citizen Kane* by Orson Wells and *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock, or television programs like *Magnum, P.I.* (Flitterman, 1985 and *LA Law* (Parry-Giles & Trandt, 1991) are better analyzed by the psychological approach to criticism. The questions the critics of this approach ask are: What motivated the unusual behavior of the protagonist of the film? How do the personalities of the characters in the television programs contribute towards their popularity and consequently their economic success?

Whereas the psychological approach to art criticism is one of the oldest and it is widely used in film criticism, this approach is only sporadically used in television program analyses. One would have expected, for example, that the so-called Jungian psychological analysis (successfully adopted by film) which, according to Rybacki & Rybacki (1991): "...offers a system for analyzing and evaluating the way a succession of images involve an audience and draw perceptual, effective, and cognitive responses from them" (p. 139), would have been also adopted by television analysts who are cognizant of the approach and its effective application to film. Some explanations for the delay of the wider application of this approach to criticism by television critics are: (a) the lack of specific knowledge of the field of psychology and psychological criticism, by the present critics of television programming, (b) the Freudian psychoanalysis of the unidimensional, and often shallow, characters of the great majority of regular television programs such as soap operas, situation comedies, dramas, etc., do not appeal to television analysts who seem to be preoccupied with the role of the medium as an institution in a mass society, rather than its potentials as an art form, (c) the behavioral schools of thought that have been embraced by visual communication media arts criticism, such as the Freudian, the Jungian, the Maslowean, and such additional approaches to criticism as semiological, dramatic, cultural, aesthetic, etc., are all closely related to the psychological approach. Consequently, they confuse rather than assist and hinder rather than contribute towards the development of an autonomous psychological approach to

television criticism.

The Ideological Approach

The Ideological Approach to visual communication media arts criticism is a rather recent approach adopted by media critics who analyze the visual communication media products, film and television programs on the bases of their philosophical, anthropological, political, economic, sociological contexts or ideologies. Since the contents of the various film and television genres are numerous and diversified, the ideological approach to criticism seems to be serving all sorts of film and television programs, a task that is demanding and therefore not always successfully performed.

Built on the ideology inherent in the visual media program's texts, this approach draws its standards to perform its critical task from a variety of issues such as (a) neo-Marxist's ideology (with emphasis on hegemony of media in society), (b) hermeneutic ideology (with emphasis on exegesis, or interpretation of the issues in the programs' texts), (c) structuralistic ideology (which concerns itself with the anthropological and philosophical codes inherent in the film or television programs), (d) gender ideology (which deals with the treatment of gender mostly in feminist programs), (e) dialogic ideology (which refers to the dialogic conflict that exist in the text of the program), and (f) discourse ideology (which refers to the social and ideological dimensions of the language of the texts), (Vande Berg & Wenner, 1991).

Some scholars believe that the ideological approach to visual communication media arts criticism is purely theoretical. It is a modernistic critical strategy that founds its application in such additional discourses as semiology, structuralism, Marxism, feminism, and neo-Freudism. When used by film critics, the ideological approach's functions are to "Describe and analyze film's properties; attempt to find the essential aspects of the medium and its relation to culture; seek answer to the basic question: What is Cinema?" (Bywater & Sobchack, p. 162). When used by media critics, the ideological approach to criticism, according to Rybacki and Rybacki (1991), "...emphasizes the truth standard of evaluation, judging rhetorical acts by a definition of truth that is derived from the tenets of a particular ideology" (p. 148). These two concepts alone confirm how diversified, multi-leveled, and, therefore, demanding, this approach is.

Although the literary sources on media criticism consider each of the ideologies mentioned above to constitute a unique critical methodology, the very nature of this approach suggests that this is an ambition on the part of these scholars that cannot be documented. The shortcomings of the ideological approach to visual communication media arts criticism are as follows: (a) It is subjective and biased in its practice because: "Ideological critics tend to assume that the truth has been revealed to them, and they may become disciples of this truth" (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 149). (b) These various ideologies are readily applicable to literacy and to art criticism, including film, but cannot apply successfully to television programs--particularly to commercial television programming--since the texts are lacking the depth stemming from such ideologies and issues. (c) None of the above ideologies concern themselves with the production aspects, the artistic conventions, and the aesthetic merits of the particular television program which needs such analysis the most.

The critical questions asked by the ideological approach to visual communication media arts are, for example: How have the historical, political, social, feminist, and other movements influenced the culture, the media, and their subsequent programming? Examples of film and television genres mostly suitable to ideological criticism are such politically oriented movies as *Lawrence of Arabia*,

and *Dr. Zhivago*, and television programs such as *Abraham Lincoln* and the *Civil War*.

The Genre Approach

The successful development of scientific theories in film studies owe a great deal to the genre approach constructs upon which film theories were built. The same is true of the development of the arts and literature. Consequently, television studies can gain considerably from the application of the genre approach to criticism that is one of the best suited approaches for the analysis of the medium.

The genre approach to visual communication media arts criticism is defined as the inquiry, analysis, and interpretation of film and television programs whose formats bare the same similarities, have the same central characteristic, assume the same purposes and objectives. The evaluative standards formed for the analysis and interpretation of various film and television genres are derived from the structural similarities found in each format, from the comparisons of the program's texts, and, generally, from the identification of the common elements of each program such as the westerns, science fiction, adventure movies, soap operas, children's programs, situation comedies, action, horror, and drama programs.

The advantages offered by this approach to television criticism in general, and to television studies in particular, are as follows: (a) Categorizing and classifying the great variety of television programs that are created and broadcasted yearly, helps the television genre critic to look more closely at the shared conventions of the programs which often are indicators of trends, movements, changes, that take place in society. (b) Searching for commonalities among television programs the genre approach critic provides valuable information on the motives, beliefs, and objectives of the industry and the producer and/or director who created the program. (c) This approach to visual communication media criticism is intertextual in its nature. Its analysis of one text is often based on and it makes reference to another. When it applies to television programs it offers reliable, and much needed, information on the scripts as a production variable of the television medium.

The critical questions in the film and television programs most suitable to the genre approach to criticism are: How do the John Wayne westerns differ from those of Clint Eastwood? What do such adventure television programs as *Moonlighting* have in common with such action programs as *Miami Vice*?

The Producer's Approach

This approach to visual communication media arts criticism is firmly established, developed, and recognized in film studies and criticism known as the auteurist approach. It is based on the fact that major film directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Wells, Frederico Fellini, and Ingmar Bergman have created a series of films that bear the signature of the director's unique approach and artistry. It is closely related to the genre approach in that the same authors and/or directors have produced films with similar themes and characteristics like Hitchcock's mystery film or John P. Ford's westerns.

This approach to criticism is applicable to television where we find common in theme and character programs produced or created by persons who impose their own style such as Norman Lear's and James Brook's *spin-offs* in situation comedies (Newcomb & Alley, 1983), or the producers of the law and courtroom series in American network television programming. This approach not only is applicable, but it is one of the most successful and widely used by today's television commentators, reviewers, and analysts.

Bywater and Sobchack (1989) suggest that the ultimate functions of the

author, producer, and/or director approach to film criticism are to: "Identify the person most responsible for the creation of the film, usually the director; describe and evaluate the work in terms of uniqueness or consistency, style, or excellence of craftsmanship. . ." (p. 51). By doing so, the critics provide invaluable information about the film's objectives and artistry. Concerning the purpose of the producer's approach to television criticism, Vande Berg and Wenner (1991) believe that this approach goes beyond the semantic and syntactic analysis of the similarities of the texts of the television genre--a task performed by the genre approach of television criticism. It extends its purpose to "...identify the formal stylistic and thematic signature of a single creator artist – the director, the producer, the writer, the writer-producer" (p. 31). This, however, suggests that the producer's approach to media criticism must look for such additional traits as personality, political ideology, social involvement, artistic competencies, and educational background of the producer of the program. This task is demanding and few visual communication media analysts are willing to undertake it, particularly today's television analysts, journalists and reporters of events who write, mainly to impress and entertain their readers.

The application of the producer's approach to film and television criticism has major advantages over the other approaches discussed so far and offers a great service towards the development of film and television studies, some of which are the following: (a) It provides what Bywater and Sobchack (1989) call: ". . .a major source of insight into a large group of single artist's creative production" (p. 77). This collection of information has the advantage that it centralizes information and makes it accessible for further film and television studies. (b) The producers and/or authors of the media products critical approach is paradigmatic or exemplary in that it exposes the various traits, the good and the bad ones, of the producer, something that brings closer the product, as an art form, with its producer, as an artist. (c) It provides standards for the analysis of the program, which are drawn heavily from production variables such as producer's and/or director's style and techniques of lighting, shooting or framing style, usage of sounds, and editing. These variables, then, easily become the constructs of film and television production theories.

The critics of the producer's approach to visual communication media arts criticism ask these basic questions: What are the unique traits of the producer of the film *La Dolce Vita* or the television program *All in the Family*? Does the producer and/or director usually favor certain lighting, framing, editing, or audio techniques unconventional to other producers and/or directors? Examples of film and network television programs that are most suitable for the producer's approach to visual communication media arts criticism are the films *The Birds* and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock) and the television programs *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Rhoda* (created by James Brooks).

The Visual Literacy Approach

The Visual Literacy approach to film and television criticism has its origins in such traditional approaches to criticism as humanistic aesthetics (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989), visual arts aesthetics (Arnheim, 1969; Dondis, 1973), and media arts aesthetics (D'Agostino, 1985; Zettl, 1990). It examines the principles governing the visual communication media arts such as film and television programs and deals, primarily, with the development of a language--and consequently the building of a body of literature--with which individuals can communicate and discuss signs, symbols, images, pictures with sounds and motion, etc. (Debes & Williams, 1978, 1970; Dondis, 1973). Individuals who learn to read and understand visual images, who are able to communicate with visual images, or those who have developed the ability to search for and evaluate visual information in media arts products, are considered

visually literate.

The visual communication media arts critics draw their value judgments from a variety of visual literacy related constructs. The most prominent among them are light and color, depth and size, framing, focusing, zooming, dissolving, cutting, editing, sounds, and motion rate of visual elements (Baggaley, Ferguson, & Brooks, 1980; D'Agostino, 1985; Metallinos, 1973, 1985; Zettl, 1978).

The heavy emphasis on (a) the synthesis of visual images, (b) the detailed analysis of the visual image's production techniques, and (c) the consideration of the perceptual, cognitive, and aesthetic variables involved in the study of film and television media, all constitute the main characteristics of the visual literacy approach to media criticism. This approach brings the critique closer to what we have termed the *vertical approach*, most appropriate and most desirable for the analysis of visual communication media arts rather than the commonly practiced, in existence today, journalistic approach that we have termed the *horizontal approach* to film and television media, most inappropriate for the study of visual communication media arts, and particularly television.

The analysts of the visual literacy approach to film and television criticism ask questions that cover all the areas of concern such as the *message* or content, the *medium* or form, and the *audience* or message's reception and impact upon its receivers. For example, in the film by Fellini, *8 1/2*, or in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the visual literacy critic will ask: In what ways did the filming techniques of these shows enhance the viewers suspense and increase their attention? Whereas in the television programs *L.A. Law* and *Law and Order*, the most suitable question would be: How did the construction of the set, assist the videotaping of these programs and create their faithful and realistic courtroom atmosphere?

The advantages of this approach are obvious, and the contribution to the development of suitable theories of the study of television criticism and aesthetics are warranted, as it is attested to by the films critics that employ this approach (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989).

Summary and Conclusions

The first part of this paper reviewed the literary sources referring to visual communication media arts criticism and underlined the standards for the evaluation of the visual communication art form mostly produced by film and television. The second part introduced, discussed, and exemplified the various approaches to visual communication media arts criticism, particularly television, such as the journalistic, the sociological, the historical, the rhetorical, the semiological, the cultural, the genre, the producer's, the narrative, the ideological, the psychological, and the visual literacy. From the proceeding discussions the following general conclusions are drawn:

1. The lack of genuine critical methodologies in visual communication media arts--particularly television--is a strong indication of the absence of scientific theories that govern the rapidly emerging new visual communication media products, such as computerized television, holographic, three-dimensional, high definition television images, and multimedia. (Metallinos, 1990a, 1990b, 1987).

2. This gap can be narrowed by the creation of academically accepted critical approaches to the above visual communication media forms. Such approaches should stem from well developed fields of study as indicated in the discussion of the approaches above, and they should be the common practice in television critical analyses.

3. Although the orthodox procedure in the development of art criticism is to base the analysis on existing theories, the establishment of critical standards for the evaluation of the newly emerged visual

communication media art products could result in the formation of constructs on which these theories could be built. An approach, rather than a method, seems to be a more appropriate procedure to follow to achieve this goal.

A more rigorous, systematic, and selective application of the appropriate approach to visual communication media criticism, to the suitable media products, warrants the development of visual communication media programs in general and television in particular, as genuine artistic forms.

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